



Gloria Molina
First District

Yvonne Brathwaite Burke
Second District

Zev Yaroslavsky
Third District

Don Knabe
Fourth District

Michael D. Antonovich
Fifth District

THOMAS L. GARTHWAITE, M.D.
Director and Chief Medical Officer

FRED LEAF
Chief Operating Officer

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES
313 N. Figueroa, Los Angeles, CA 90012
(213) 240-8101

November 25, 2003

TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Thomas L. Garthwaite, M.D.
Director and Chief Medical Officer

Jonathan E. Fielding, M.D., M.P.H.
Director of Public Health and Health Officer

SUBJECT: **HOUSING INSPECTION PROGRAM**
(Agenda Items # 12 and 17, November 25, 2003)

On November 18, 2003, KNBC ran an investigative report by investigative reporter Joel Grover, that showed deplorable and unsanitary conditions in several rental apartment units. The story raised questions about the extent to which tenants can get information about the results of our housing inspections and about the effectiveness of our inspections in assuring that units are maintained in a habitable and safe condition. On November 19, 2003, we provided you with a report of actions we are taking to improve this program. This is a further update on this program.

FOLLOW-UP TO REPORT

Several actions were taken to follow up on the report. Dr. Jonathan Fielding spoke with Joel Grover, on November 19, and his comments were incorporated into the second program segment by KNBC. Dr. Fielding visited two of the sites featured in the news story, the apartments in Burbank and Wilmington, in order to see the problems directly. He also met with a group of the housing inspectors and their supervisors, those on the front line of this problem to learn of their concerns and suggestions for program improvement.

The report on the seven properties was treated as a complaint for each property and inspectors were sent to each property. Notices of violations were issued for five properties. One property was already in the process of follow-up to a previous inspection and the complaint was added to that process.

The actions we are taking to improve the program are detailed below.

MAKING INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE

We took immediate action to make information about the inspections available on the Department's web-sites. Data from routine housing inspections since May 2003 were posted November 18. Data for the past two years are now posted along with the score and an explanation of the score. We are in the process of adding a housing complaint form, as well as data about problem abatement.

We are working with County Counsel to propose an ordinance requiring that landlords post signs or provide copies of information to tenants which informs them of the telephone number to call to make complaints and that information about previous inspections is available on the internet or through telephone request. We plan to have this filed for Board consideration in early January.

Based on Grover's report that his staff encountered delays in getting copies of inspection reports, Environmental Health staff are being reminded of the importance of customer relations and timely responses.

IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INSPECTIONS

The Department is reviewing its current inspection program to determine whether enhanced staffing, with more in-depth inspections of problem properties, particularly including repeated attempts to inspect inside individual units, will yield better overall compliance and improve the health and safety of rental housing. We will analyze whether additional staff, paid from increased fees, would provide measurable improvements. Recommendations from this review will be provided to the Board by December 15.

We recently restructured the management organization of housing units, so that they are separately administered from the food inspections. We are analyzing the impacts of this and looking for ways to improve the unit's effectiveness. We are also analyzing the data on turnover and vacancies to determine what steps are warranted to assure full staffing for this function.

We are also reviewing the extent to which complaints which occur when the tenant and landlord are in dispute and an eviction proceeding is in process, are creating a workload which slows down the routine inspection process. We will include recommendations on this also by December 15.

Further, we are reviewing the inspection form to determine whether the findings for common areas should be separated from those of the insides of apartments. In some cases, the common areas may be well maintained, while apartments are in bad shape.

TRACKING INSPECTIONS AND COMPLIANCE

Although Environmental Health does maintain a database of housing inspections and will be migrating to the multi-department property abatement system (eDAPTS) when fully implemented, the Department will establish interim systems to be sure that routine inspections of properties are not missed. We will also establish a coordinated database to track all complaint inspections and enhance tracking of compliance by owners in correcting violations. Implementation of these tracking systems will be accomplished by February 1, 2004.

ENFORCEMENT

We will meet with city attorneys and the District Attorney to emphasize our desire to emphasize prosecution of recalcitrant landlords. We will also discuss ways to improve coordinated enforcement against recalcitrant landlords.

We are exploring with County Counsel whether the Board may authorize imposition of administrative fines as a means of enhancing compliance

We are also exploring the imposition of reinspection fees, to provide an economic incentive for recalcitrant landlords to cooperate in property clean-up and improvement. The new restaurant grading program proved that economic incentives can be important motivational forces and we are reviewing ways to incorporate these types of incentives into housing.

FOLLOW-UP

We provide a further report by December 15, 2003. In the meantime, if you have any questions or need additional information, please let us know.

TLG:JEF:jfs

c: Chief Administrative Officer
County Counsel
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors